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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 000780

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SUBJECT: MFA TO INVOLVE CIVIL SOCIETY IN FORUM FOR THE FUTURE PREPARATIONS

REF: MANAMA 705

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: MFA Assistant Under Secretary Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa told Pol/Econ chief May 25 that the MFA plans to invite Bahraini NGOs involved in politics, human rights, women's issues, and youth to a briefing on the Forum for the Future (FfF) conference. According to a list of the proposed invitees, the MFA would include a wide range of groups in the briefing, including groups such as Al Wifaq and the National Democratic Action Society that represent trends in the opposition. Shaikh Abdul Aziz wondered if there could be time at the FfF conference in November dedicated specifically to Bahraini NGOs so there could be some "local flavor" for participating delegations. Press reports have confirmed what contacts have been telling us for some time, that Bahraini NGOs are planning to organize a "shadow" forum to take place at the same time as the real event to highlight their concerns in front of an international audience. The MFA's outreach to local civil society organizations could help to limit participation in the "shadow" meeting and maintain NGO focus on the Forum. End Summary.

12. (SBU) MFA Assistant Under Secretary for Coordination and Follow-Up Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa told P/E chief May 25 that either he or Minister of Foreign Affairs Shaikh Mohammed bin Mubarak Al Khalifa would soon brief Bahraini NGOs on preparations for the November 11-12 Forum for the Future conference in Manama. The MFA plans to invite the heads of 43 political, human rights, women's, and youth civil society organizations to a session to describe the role they can play in the FfF process.

13. (SBU) Shaikh Abdul Aziz passed P/E chief the list of NGOs to be invited and noted they include a wide range of organizations, including the most prominent opposition societies. While political societies Al Minbar, Al Asalah, and Al Mithaq, who are to varying degrees friendly to the government, will be invited, opposition societies Al Wifaq and National Democratic Action Society will also be included. From the human rights field, the Bahrain Human Rights Society, Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society, and Bahrain Transparency Society will be invited. The women's groups to be invited include the Mother and Child Welfare Society and the Future Women's Society, which is close to Al Wifaq. The youth groups include the Bahraini Youth Society and the Bahrain Youth Forum.

14. (SBU) While recognizing that the FfF Steering Committee (reftel) had not addressed the issue, Shaikh Abdul Aziz wondered if a few representatives of Bahraini NGOs could speak at the November conference. Bahraini civil society was anxious to take part in the conference and allowing a few to speak could provide some "local flavor" for the participating delegations.

15. (SBU) Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that Bahrain was responsible for taking the lead on the "women's empowerment" civil society dialogue in the lead-up to the conference. The MFA would discuss the issue soon with the Bahraini Supreme Council for Women to get its ideas and input, and would likely partner with either the Arab International Women's Forum or Women in Business International to organize the NGO meetings.

16. (SBU) Shaikh Abdul Aziz said that the government wanted to encourage Bahraini NGOs to participate in all four of the thematic civil society dialogues, on transparency, rule of law, human rights, and women's empowerment. The GOB would consider funding the travel of a few Bahraini NGO representatives to the thematic meetings to encourage their participation and to ensure that their views were well represented in the reports and recommendations the NGOs will deliver at the FfF.

17. (SBU) Press reports on May 24 and 25 confirmed what contacts have been telling us for several weeks: Bahraini civil society organizations intend to hold a "shadow" Forum for the Future conference in Bahrain at the same time as the real Forum. Two parliamentary deputies, two opposition

politicians, and a human rights activist announced in the press May 24 their intention to "explain their views" on important national issues to Forum participants. They consider the Forum to be a good opportunity to put pressure on the government to "meet the demands and hopes of the people" on reforms.

18. (C) Comment: We expect some type of parallel "Forum" to take place in Bahrain at the same time as the real conference. How the government works with domestic civil society in the run-up to the Forum will likely determine the extent of participation in the parallel event, but the usual group of entrenched oppositionists will almost certainly use the opportunity to trumpet their views and pressure the government. The MFA's plan of outreach to civil society is not business-as-usual here and signals the GOB's seriousness about engaging civil society in the FfF process.

MONROE